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Suburban lawmakers and local officials said Tuesday that suburban Cook, Lake and McHenry counties will face many transit needs in the coming years and must work together to receive equitable transportation funding.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, and U.S. Rep. Melissa Bean, D-8th, of Barrington hosted the first meeting of the bi-partisan Suburban Transportation Commission at the Lake County Division of Transportation in Libertyville. Kirk and Bean were joined by state lawmakers and county and local officials to discuss the region's transit needs.

Kirk said the effort is "completely bi-partisan and bi-congressional" and seeks to ensure suburban counties are not left out when decisions are made regarding transit issues and funding.

"Two thirds of all Chicagoland residents now live in the suburbs," said Kirk. "Our transportation priorities should reflect the needs of this new suburban majority."

Last year, the Chicago Transit Authority received approximately \$280 in federal dollars, compared to \$172 million for Metra and \$48 million for Pace which serve largely suburban commuters. Meanwhile, between 1985-2005, ridership on the CTA declined by 23 percent, while riders of Metra increased by more than 10 percent.

Recently, the Regional Transit Authority unveiled its Moving Beyond Congestion plan, which calls for a \$10 billion investment over five years to fund capital improvements for transit services like the CTA, Metra and Pace and another \$400 million annually in additional operating revenue.

Kirk, however, worries said that the CTA's current pension crisis raises important issues about the future of transportation funding in northeastern Illinois. He fears suburban residents may be

asked to pay higher taxes to bail out the CTA, with residents in suburban counties receiving little in return in terms of improved transit.

"Nobody is against helping the CTA, but it shouldn't be at the expense of suburban counties," he said.

Suburban Lake and McHenry county officials said they're transportation needs are growing but transit dollars are not keeping pace.

Martin Buehler, director of the Lake County Division of Transportation, said most suburban transit dollars are going toward operations of the system, leaving little money for basic maintenance or capital improvements.

"The region can not support a transit system for very long if it cannot to pay the cost of operating it," he said. "The region can also not operate a transit system reliably, and over the long run, if it not pay the cost of maintaining it."

Ken Koehler, chairman of the McHenry County Board, said more and more McHenry county residents are taking the train to work but the hours and availability of train service are limited. He said there is also a growing need for paratransit services for senior citizens and the disabled.

"We clearly have unmet needs," he said. "We know what these needs are. We truly believe those needs will only be met if the funding formula is changed."

Koehler said he believes there is a need for more suburban representation on the RTA board and increased input from suburban communities regarding funding transit in the region.

Dick Welton, former mayor of Gurnee, who serves on the board of Pace suburban bus service, said funding for the agency is "woefully inadequate" to meet the growing need for service in

suburban counties.

In Lake County, for example, he said Pace wants to establish an integrated countywide paratransit system to serve seniors and the disabled but have not yet been able to fully implement it because of funding constraints.

"We need to add resources to make public transportation a viable option to all residents of Lake County," said Welton.

Jim Reilly, chairman of the board of the RTA, said their proposed Moving Beyond Congestion program, which sought input from Metra, Pace and the CTA, would provide much needed capital and operating funds for all transit services in the region.

"I don't think we should view this as a city versus suburban issue. At the end of the day, if we don't come together to fund a program for transit, all of the good things we want to do wouldn't be possible."